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SHORT GRASS COUNTRY

By Monte Noelke

Choosing the least crowded seasons to travel works a lot like shipping at the right time. Opportunities come in every mail call. Outfitters delight in sending out solicitations for all sorts of adventures, ranging from riding an elephant across India on a side saddle to being the first person to crawl on your hands and knees into an arctic polar bear's den to watch the cubs play while the mother naps away the winter.

Three or four weeks ago a bigger temptation arose in the form of a heavily discounted air fare to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. The quoted price brought on a case of wanderlust wilder than an astronaut's dreams.

Contacts in Halifax and the tourist offices increased the fever by claiming they hadn't seen the tourist in such a long time that they'd faint at the sight of a couple wearing matching shirts and caps with cameras slung over both shoulders. And when the Park Ranger's office responded way up on the northern tip of Cape Breton, he made the roads seem so vacant that I considered packing a mirror in case a signaling device was needed to call for help.

Having been in the Maritime Provinces before, during the summer months, the proximity of winter was not only appealing for the beginning of the fall leaf colors, but also to be up there when the citizens had to be putting up storm windows and caulking up their key holes and cutting stove wood instead of carrying out their infernal habits of brushing on about six gallons of white paint to every square foot of their houses..

Canadians are idiots about whitewash. The incidence of paintbrush elbow and lead poisoning from paint fumes is bound to rank among big cripplers in those dominions. It would seem the hoary winter frost and deep snowbanks would fulfill their preference for the color white. But other than a few rebels with green walls, every church and cottage features a black roof and white walls.

Traffic was light along the Atlantic Coast driving northward to the tip of Cape Breton. Buying passage on an excursion boat to see the shipwrecks and look for whales brought out four passengers for a 40-foot craft.

At 20 bucks a head, the trip lost money. But after the captain's wife said her husband descended from a long line of lighthouse keepers and was raised on a lonely island a third of the distance at sea to New Foundland, of course he still thought four people were a big crowd.

Similar to camp men on a ranch, this ex-lighthouse keeper did a professional job of embellishing his shipwreck stories of ghosts, white-robed women walking the beaches at night, and a whopper of a good tale about a pair of Spanish riding boots turning up after the war of 1898 to support a hidden treasure yarn about Spaniards sailing all the way up from Cuba to hide a hoard of gold.

Deft indeed he was along that line. "My mother," he said, "took care of an old sailor who had the boots in his sea chest." The mother support ended public doubt and caused me to back off from telling the other three passengers how the Boss found a set of Spanish barefoot stirrups and an old homemade knife in a cave on the Pecos River down in Texas.

But the most exciting part was taking us right up on pilot whales feeding and diving and breaching in a cold overcast sea. On and off, white-sided porpoises raced by as sleek as an ice skater's blade.

The chance never came to trip our narrator up. Story telling competition grows tougher every year. Fat chance of topping a man who has seen whales and basking sharks with eyes as big as dinner plates from my background where 60-inch rattlesnakes excite the populace. Solitude is a wonderful stimulant for the imagination